DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 275 CS 213 342

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TITLE Shaping the Portfolio Course: The Uses of Direct Assessment and the Portfolio as a Critical Thinking Tool.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; Course Content; Essays; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Peer Evaluation; Portfolios (Background Materials); *Student Evaluation; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Northwest Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

A composition teacher at Northwest Missouri State University completely redesigned the freshman composition course to include writing portfolios while meeting state requirements for direct assessment and allaying departmental fears. A unit on language history and a half-dozen literature selections were dropped in favor of timed, in-class essay writing assignments and analysis, discussion, and thought in peer groups. The teacher answered questions with questions, engaged in Socratic dialogues, and focused on students' thoughts by chalk-board brainstorming. Most students had not experienced the pressure of writing under a 50-minute deadline, and following completion of the timed essays the students and the teacher talked further about the need to develop a succinct thesis paragraph, concrete support for the argument, and a sound conclusion. Whether working on research papers, preparing for the timed essays, or writing about literature, class time was largely a series of workshops. After about a month of writing about literature, revising their essays, and learning they could think through problems, the students overcame their free-floating anxiety to the point of being ready to write the timed essay that would be assessed holistically by another faculty member. Their research papers and essays on literature gave them confidence in their analytical abilities; the first timed essay gave them confidence in their ability to analyze reading material and to develop an argument within 50 minutes' time. In a letter to the portfolio reader, one student noted that she benefited from receiving peer reaction to her work and learned to think more critically when reading and writing. (The student's letter is attached.) (RS)

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Shaping the Portfolio Course: The Uses of Direct Assessment and the Portfolio as a Critical Thinking Tool

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As a fledgling radio announcer, I was taught to avoid the cardinal sin of broadcasting: dead air. As a management consultant, while instructing outplacement clients how to negotiate salaries, I taught them this: during the pregnant pause between offers and counteroffers, the first to speak is the one who loses. As a participant at a critical thinking workshop, I learned something else: silence is something to be cherished; silence is productive.

Silence, I learned, is not something to be avoided and filled with idle d.j. chatter; neither is it something to be avoided for fear of losing an employment advantage; nor is it something to be filled with a nervous response to my own question after an eternal eight-second pause. Instead, I learned this: the first to speak, provided it's a student, is the winner.

The student, who is allowed time to think through lecture or discussion material before answering, is better able to fill up another blank--the 8½ by 11-inch white space the size of Texas, the blue book as vast as the North American continent, the manila folder containing the portfolio of cosmic dimensions. Silence, my students learned in the Spring, 1991 term, was to their advantage

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because it forced them to think through questions, to take a stand, and to argue for a position.

Although I am to address you today on the role of the timed essay in Northwest Missouri State University's composition portfolio, I will nevertheless indicate how my composition students' used the fifty-minute write, along with essays written outside of class (which were edited during classroom peer sessions, and revised further) to develop their critical thinking--and writing--skills.

In brief, my students discovered that the timed essay was a microcosm of the entire class, they learned that it was a sister planet to other essays and the research paper, and they also learned that the timed essay prepared them for a galactic leap to the worlds of other disciplines. Perhaps more importantly, my composition students discovered that the silence of space powered their written vehicles.

But upon hearing that I would be participating in the portfolio project, I thought that it would be like going on a Star Trek. Nevertheless, I quickly resolved to boldly go where I had not gone before. I completely redesigned the course--doing so to meet state requirements and to allay departmental fears.

The State of Missouri had mandated a direct assessment. Moreover, some English department colleagues wanted a "check," fearing that students might rely too heavily upon others for revision (namely, peers, tutors, professors, or

ghosts). So, my new syllabus had to make time for the regular timed essay, as well as a practice one.

Gone were the unit on language history and etymologies and a half-dozen literature selections. Space opened up for more analysis, discussion, and thought in peer groups for their argumentative research paper at the beginning of the term, their two timed essays in the middle of the term, their essays on literary selections, and their final essay during the last ten weeks of the semester. And I implemented silence. That is, my refusal to provide answers by answering questions with questions, by engaging in Socratic dialogue, and by chalk-board brainstorming focused my students' thoughts.

Nevertheless, the practice timed essay proved to be something different from anything else my freshmen had ever written. I had incorrectly assumed that my students, whose mean ACT score was 21.36, would transfer their newly acquired research skills from their term paper to their timed essay. "After all," I reasoned, "they had just spent a third of the semester researching, organizing material, developing an argument, using internal documentation, and writing. The timed essay was really a mini-term paper." Wrong.

Most had not experienced the pressure of writing under a fifty-minute deadline, and what they produced was neither as tightly argued nor as polished as the argumentative

research paper they had just produced in the first six weeks of the semester.

This, despite the fact that readings were handed out in advance, that we spent the following week discussing their contents and arguments, practicing invention and prewriting strategies, and formulating possible argumentative theses. This, despite the fact that the practice essay served as their midterm examination. I asked many questions and answered only a few to ensure that the students would individually navigate their own courses, which I wrote in a brainstorming series of loose outlines on the board.

During these sessions, however, the classes and I discovered that allowing the students to voice ideas, which I recorded on the board in a class-wide brainstorming session, proved most beneficial. No one's idea was denigrated; each was recorded; each was attached to a related topic or served as a category. The students could see the emergence and growth of theses and support in the blank space of the silent, non-judgmental chalk board. We continued to use this technique throughout the remaining weeks of the semester when we discussed our literature selections.

Then, once the practice timed essays were completed, I assessed them holistically, using the six-point scale devised for our fall placement essays, and handed them back. The students and I talked further about the need to develop a succinct thesis paragraph, concrete support for the

argument, and a sound conclusion to prepare them for the required timed essay, the expectations of outside anonymous readers, and for timed examination essays in other classes. They learned that the classical arrangement useful in a research paper can also be utilized in a blue book.

A few weeks later, several students also volunteered that the timed essay experience helped them write better examinations in other courses. Presumably, the experience taught them how to think through a question, amass supportive material, organize it, and defend their position.

Throughout the semester, whether we were working on research papers, preparation for the timed essays, or writing about literature, class time was largely a series of workshops. Peer, tutor, and instructor interaction was devoted to developing theses and rhetorical strategies. My tutor and I moved from group to group and challenged each student to develop an original thesis, to chart individual tacks as they navigated their writing odysseys. Soon, their peers joined in with helpful suggestions. We provided a lot of silent space by answering only a few questions--and by asking more. The ensuing Socratic dialogues forced my students to develop their theses and arguments on their own.

After the term paper, we proceeded to write narrative, comparative and argumentative essays about literature. With thinking and writing about literature came the shock of outer space. My composition students agonized because I would not tell them what to think about a piece of

literature, nor would I provide a thesis answer to the assigned question. One typical assignment: compare the vision of happiness in Bierce's "Incident at Owl Creek Bridge" with that in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." The class members had discovered, through Miranda eyes, a brave new world of ideas that they could describe, not with the tongue of Caliban, but of fledgling Prosperos. Well, some of them at least.

In a given class period, I would lecture about the assigned story for 15 or 20 minutes, giving background information, making certain the class understood the basic plot. Then, I would spend the remaining class time walking from peer group to peer group, each composed of four or five students, asking the students what their individual theses were, how they planned to develop their arguments, and what citations they could use as support. All of my students found they were now beyond the gravitational pull of their familiar world--factual material used in their research and their timed essay.

They perceived themselves as free-floating. Rather than bringing them back to their home base, I persisted in entering into Socratic dialogue, to make each look within the text and within themselves to come up with answers that would propel them into higher orbits. I either answered their questions with a leading question, or with silence. Within fifty minutes' time for most, and 100 minutes for the remaining few, each discovered that they could indeed leap

into the outer limits of their own experience, voyage to other worlds, and share their discoveries with members of their own peer group, as well as with the other groups within the class.

After a month of writing about literature, revising their essays, and learning they could think through problems, my students overcame their free-floating anxiety and began to soar in their new-found silence of space. They were ready to write the timed essay which would be assessed holistically by another faculty member.

They succeeded. The research paper and essays on literature gave them confidence in their analytical abilities; the first timed essay gave them confidence in their ability to analyze reading material and to develop an argument within fifty minutes' time.

The remaining weeks of the semester were spent on more literature, including The Taming of the Shrew. More Socratic questions on my part, more silence, more confident voyages to the worlds of literature, and a successful final timed essay in which my students discussed the use of disguises in Shakespeare's play and argued whether or not they believed Katherine was really tamed.

Susan Kelly's letter to the portfolio reader is one of the most typical responses to the entire project. She begins her letter by saying that she "was not at all looking forward to it," but concedes the portfolio project was beneficial. Kelly writes:

> It kept me on my toes because I wanted to write papers that I felt were my best and that other professors, besides Dr. Gruber, would enjoy. It's one thing to have to write a good paper for the professor you've had all semester, but it's more challenging to know that others would also be reading your work.

Additionally, Susan Kelly concludes that the habit of revision is beneficial for all her papers, not just those in composition. Moreover, she benefited from receiving peer reaction to her work, from exchanging ideas with members of her group and other classmates. Most important, Kelly learned "to think more critically when reading and writing." She heard the sound of silence and wrote.

with the views toward that argument, and whether we felt those views were more liberal or conservative. I found the article very interesting and enjoyed writing on it.

Now that I am almost through with composition, I realize how much the class has helped me. Dr. Gruber has taught me to think more critically when reading and writing. He has also helped me in that he has us revise all of our papers a second time. This has gotten me into the habit of doing this with all of my papers, not just the ones for his class. I also believe that doing the workshopping in class has helped. I was able to get the opinions of my peers on my writing, and also get some more good ideas on what to write. All in all, I feel that I have benefited greatly from taking Dr. Gruber's class, and also by doing this portfolio.

Sincerely,

Susan R. Kelly

Susan R. Kelly